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SUBJECT: QATARI PRIVATE COMPANIES CONTINUE ABUSING LOW-PAID LABORERS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Over 400 Nepalese laborers were detained May 29 by the Qatari Ministry of Interior's Criminal Investigation Department (CID) over a labor dispute with their employer, Trace Electronics. Despite legal protections for foreign workers, this incident demonstrates that private companies in Qatar continue to abuse low-paid workers without fear of legal repercussions. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Nepalese workers employed by Trace Electronics collectively submitted to their employer May 14 a written request for salary increases and improvements to their housing facilities. The laborers asserted that their living quarters were in poor condition due to a shortage of working toilets and air conditioners and generally crowded conditions. The Nepalese workers also forwarded a copy of their request to the Nepalese Embassy. On May 28, after Trace Electronics, management failed to act on their request, the Nepalese laborers went on strike, in violation of provisions of Qatar's labor law governing strikes. The following day, May 29, over 400 laborers were detained by CID at the request of Trace Electronics.

¶3. (SBU) Following discussions between the Nepalese Embassy and Trace Electronics, management, CID released June 3 most of the detained employees. However, 33 Nepalese laborers, presumably the leaders of the strike, remained in jail pending their expected repatriation to Nepal despite their expressed willingness to return to work under the terms of their original contract. These 33 laborers are still awaiting deportation as of this writing. The above events are consistent with the standard resolution of labor conflicts with Qatari companies. Striking laborers are typically arrested and a majority of them released a few days later once the strike leaders have been identified and deportation proceedings against them initiated.

¶4. (SBU) Domestic workers of foreign origin in Qatar are subject to abuse on an individual basis as well. On May 30, for example, the Indian Embassy, working through the Indian Community Benevolent Fund (ICBF), recounted two incidents of domestic labor abuse to the Qatari government. Both involved personal drivers, one of whom was physically assaulted by the sponsor. ICBF, which provides care packages to detained laborers facing deportation proceedings, has worked with the Indian Embassy to bring to the host government's attention other egregious cases. According to ICBF sources, only a small number of cases of which it is aware are raised with the Government of Qatar.

¶5. (U) The GOQ has begun taking action against companies that violate labor laws. An article from the English-language Peninsula newspaper, dated June 7, reported that the Qatari Labor Department issued citations to 48 firms the week of May 18 for violations. Common violations were the withholding of wages and failure to provide housing assistance to employees. Employers in some instances were also cited for violating health and safety regulations. According to the press

report, the citations are a result of increased inspections by the authorities to ensure that local companies are complying with labor laws. However, Qatari labor law does not stipulate what penalties can be taken against cited companies for labor law violations. According to the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, enforcement was carried out under the direction of the Assistant Undersecretary of Labor and resulted in hundreds of actions intended to force compliance with labor laws. However, the legal justification for the citations remains unclear, as do the details of what sanctions were imposed on violating companies.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: Qatari labor laws grant workers a right to strike only under very restrictive conditions that, in practice, make it unlikely that a strike will ever be considered legal, as was the case here. Nevertheless, from time to time foreign workers stage ad-hoc strikes seeking redress for grievances. The prohibition on labor committees and unions in Qatar for anyone but Qatari citizens exacerbates the problem, since there are no legal and viable channels to address such grievances. Embassy Doha does not intervene in cases of non-Americans, but we do raise unfair and unlawful labor practices across the board with the GOQ in an effort to promote lasting solutions consistent with international norms and standards.

RATNEY